THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

A Paternal Government

By LUELLA LATHROP

O THE day of his death, Jack Dalton never decided whether it was predestination or fate that ruined his life, or whether it "just happened," but he leaned toward the latter opinion.

Certain transactions in connection with a game called poker made it desirable for Jack to absent himself from his accustomed haunts.

In the course of time he drifted to the Dakota Indian reservation, and found shelter in the tepee of Weuto (which, being translated, means Blue Woman).

Weuto was not young or handsome, but her possessions in land and cattle were large.

There was a rumor afloat (indeed, there was always such a rumor) of the early opening of the reservation, and Jack saw himself, in fancy, the possessor of Weuto's 500 acres.

So Jack lived on in Weuto's tepee, and ate of the rations provided by the government.

Food and shelter are worth considering when a man is homeless, penniless and knows that there is a price upon his head.

And Jack—shall I say he married Weuto? There is no record of any ceremony, but Weuto looked upon him as her husband.

Jack always intended to go out into the world again, "when the thing had blown over," as he expressed it.

What is the nameless influence which the Indians exert over the white man who lives among them? He may dream of returning to his own again, but he never will. The slothful life, the absence of responsibility, the squalid surroundings, benumb his energies. He sinks to a lower level than that of the savage himself.

When the flowers of another summer rioted in profusion over the plains of the Dakotas, a tiny red papoose opened her black eyes upon the smoke-stained canvas walls of Weuto's tepee.

None of the conventional raptures of the father over his first-born came to Jack.

Instead, he began to realize that no man lives to himself; and that his own was not the only life he had ruined.

As became a woman who had a white husband, Weuto felt herself very superior to the squaws about her. She scorned an Indian name for the baby, and called her Emily. By some strange freak of inexorable nature, the baby was very nearly white, and was the exact image of Jack. When Jack absented himself from the tepee, Weuto was not inconsolable. If he never returned, what then? Oh, well, husbands are easy to obtain on the reservation, if one has land and cattle.

Besides, Jack was not always an agreeable companion, and he was notably inconsiderate: when Weuto must bring water so far, it seemed useless to use it to wash one's self, when one was more comfortable unwashed; and then there was soap, that ill-smelling invention of the white people.

When she found Jack's body out on the prairie, an empty revolver in his hand, she accepted his death with stoical composure.

The next week Zitka-ada Ze (Yellow Bird) had taken Jack's place in the tepee, and the waters of oblivion rolled over his misdeeds and his sorrows.

Little Emily when she was 4 was taken to the government school, and henceforth for a long time life flowed evenly and smoothly for the little girl.

The teachers kept her at the school during the vacations. Through all these years she never went back to Weuto's tepee, though it was only twenty miles away, and Weuto seldom came to see her. There were many beady-eyed, moon-faced papooses in the tepee. Neither their advent nor their care, however, was a great consideration to Weuto. Yet, as the government rations steadily grew less, Weuto must sow corn and harvest it; must go to the river for wood, and care for the ponies, her lord and master being superior to labor. There were many tasks for her patient hands.

The last winter at the school was a very happy time for Emily.

She was the constant companion of the teachers, and intellectually their equal.

The little reading circle was her especial delight. They were reading Shakespeare (as is the custom of country circles), and Emily read with delight.

And now Emily was 18—tall, graceful, with an oval face, expressive black eyes and the delicate hands and feet usual with a strain of Indian blood.

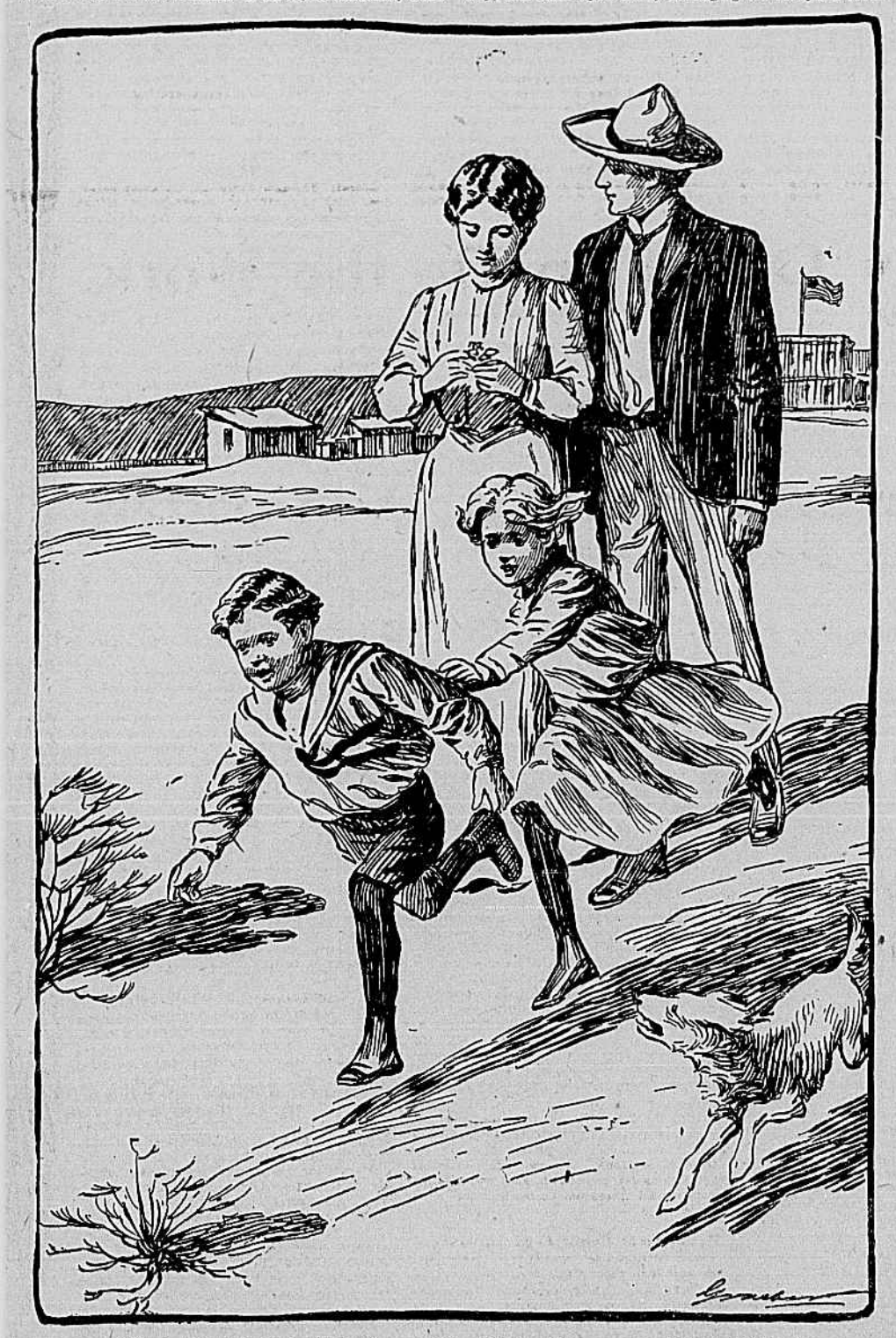
But Emily never thought of herself as an Indian. In fact, she thought very little about herself.

Her life was full of healthy, congenial tasks, and she was happy, just as a bird is happy, with no thought for the past or the future.

For fourteen years she had not been away from the government school, even to go back to Weuto's tepee. In all her life she had never been away from the reservation, and that is not the best place to learn of life.

And so poor Emily had her awakening.

Some visitors were strolling through the school one day, and came upon Emily arranging the reception room.



"Each Day He Joined Emily and Her Little Charges on Their Walks"

"Dear me," exclaimed a shrill-voiced woman, eyeglass to eye, "what a pretty squaw, and nearly white, too! Now isn't she just as white as those Lowney girls who came to the parties last winter? Dear me! What a pity to waste so many advantages on her! I suppose when her schooldays are over she will live in a tepee and never comb her hair."

And the group passed on, discussing Emily, as if she were deaf, dumb and blind.

Emily had stood like a statue, the dustcloth in her hand. Her Indian blood helped her to stoicism. She fled to her room with burning cheeks. All night she lay staring into the darkness, trying to decipher the features of that fearful monster, the Future.

What could she do but go back to the tepee—Weuto's tepee, with all its squalor and wretchedness?

Perhaps she might come to leave her hair unbound and wear a blanket. She did not know that for years the teachers had secretly bought her clothes that she might not be obliged to wear the coarse, ill-fitting clothing provided by the government for its wards.

The next morning she went about her accustomed duties with a heavy heart.

Her thoughts were in a maze. Naturally, she turned to the resident Indian Agent. She would ask him to help her to an occupation. He was a florid, rotund man, much impressed with the dignity and importance of John Deane, Esq., and imbued with the idea that to be half Indian is to be all Indian, and to be utterly devoid of all sense or sensibility.

"Go back and live among 'em, of course; that's what we've educated you for. Teach the confounded red devils to clean up once in a while."

But Mrs. Deane was present. She was a practical woman. The young Deanes were many in number, and contrary by nature; Emily seemed gentle, and could probably be secured for a small sum. They know nothing of money matters, these Indians, she explained to Mr. Deane.

So Mrs. Deane "pitied the poor dear," and, just as the bottomless pit seemed opening before Emily's feet, Mrs. Deane "offered her a home" (without compensation), and Emily accepted.

Emily's belongings, her slender stock of clothes, the few treasured books given her by the teachers, were removed to a stuffy attic bedroom in the "Residence of Indian Agent Deane."

Though the bread of dependence was very bitter to Emily, there was a compensation. (There must always be a compensation, else how could one keep on living?)

There was an exchange of clerks at the agency in June. One of the new ones was Allen West, whose family felt that, as Dakota was so far from civilization, he could bring no further disgrace upon them.

He admired Emily; he had admired many women. A few had admired him. He was horribly lonely, forty miles from a game of pool or a newspaper. The few government buildings comprising the agency seemed such a tiny dot on the limitless, wind-swept prairie.

Each day he joined Emily and her little charges on their walks. His conversation fascinated Emily. He made her many little gifts. He brought her books, which she read far into the night.

Perhaps in his heart he pitied the monotony of the girl's life. Time hung heavily on his own hands.

To Emily his presence was the kingdom of heaven come down to earth.

She invested him with virtues of which he had never dreamed. In reality, he was blase, lazy, a complete failure, and 40.

For a little while the sun of happiness shone upon Emily's life again.

All through the beautiful Dakota autumn, when the skies are so blue and the few clouds cast brown shadows on the yellowing prairie, the constant thought of Allen glorified each moment of Emily's life.

Nothing could be lovelier than the plain of Southern Dakota in the fall—the sweep of country is so broad, so magnificent.

In the morning sun the hills that rise like an amphitheatre many miles back from the Missouri shine golden. In the evening they hide their heads behind a mystic veil of purple mist.

The prairie has as many moods as a capricious woman. Some days the sun shines, the face of the prairie radiates golden lights, the wind blows merrily. Again the sky is gray, the prairie is dun and sear, the wind booms sullenly, and whips the sunflowers viciously about, and hopelessness settles down upon one. There seems nothing in the world worth any further struggle.

Then there are rare days, when the wind is hushed; fleecy clouds float in the sky; the prairie melts away into the distance, dim, mysterious. To be alone on the prairie on such a day is to be overcome with a sense of personal insignificance. To the devout soul, the thought, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" must instinctively come.

Christmas, that festival of all the year on the reservation, came and went.

Emily and Allen put the finishing touches on the Christmas trees in the little chapel, where two generations of Indian youths had been instructed in the way they should go.

Allen helped Emily to descend from her rude steps beside the tree. He held her hand for a moment. Her eyes were luminous with love. He drew her into his arms. Emily turned her face to receive his kiss as naturally as a flower turns to the sun.

Silently they walked home together beneath the twinkling December stars. At the door Emily shyly pressed into Allen's hand a beaded purse. She had spent many hours' work upon it; her dreams had been sewn into its bright pattern.

With the new year, Mildred Deane came home from an Eastern college.

Mildred Deane was a much beribboned, beruffled young lady. Her first act was to teach the Indian girl "her place as a servant," as she expressed it. For Emily's intelligence and her affection for the children had won her some consideration even in that household.

In January Weuto chose to make a pilgrimage to the agency. Emily was tall and straight, with pure oval face and shining bands of hair above her trim blue print gown.

Weuto did not grow old gracefully. Her form was bent with much dragging of tepee poles and carrying of burdens.

Her hair hung in disordered locks about her wrinkled neck. She had forgotten all the little that Emily's father taught her. Her face was seamed and furrowed; her mouth cruel.

She wore the loose calico waist and short skirt of the Indian woman, but her blankets were many and gorgeous. To the squaw the dress is nothing, the blanket everything.

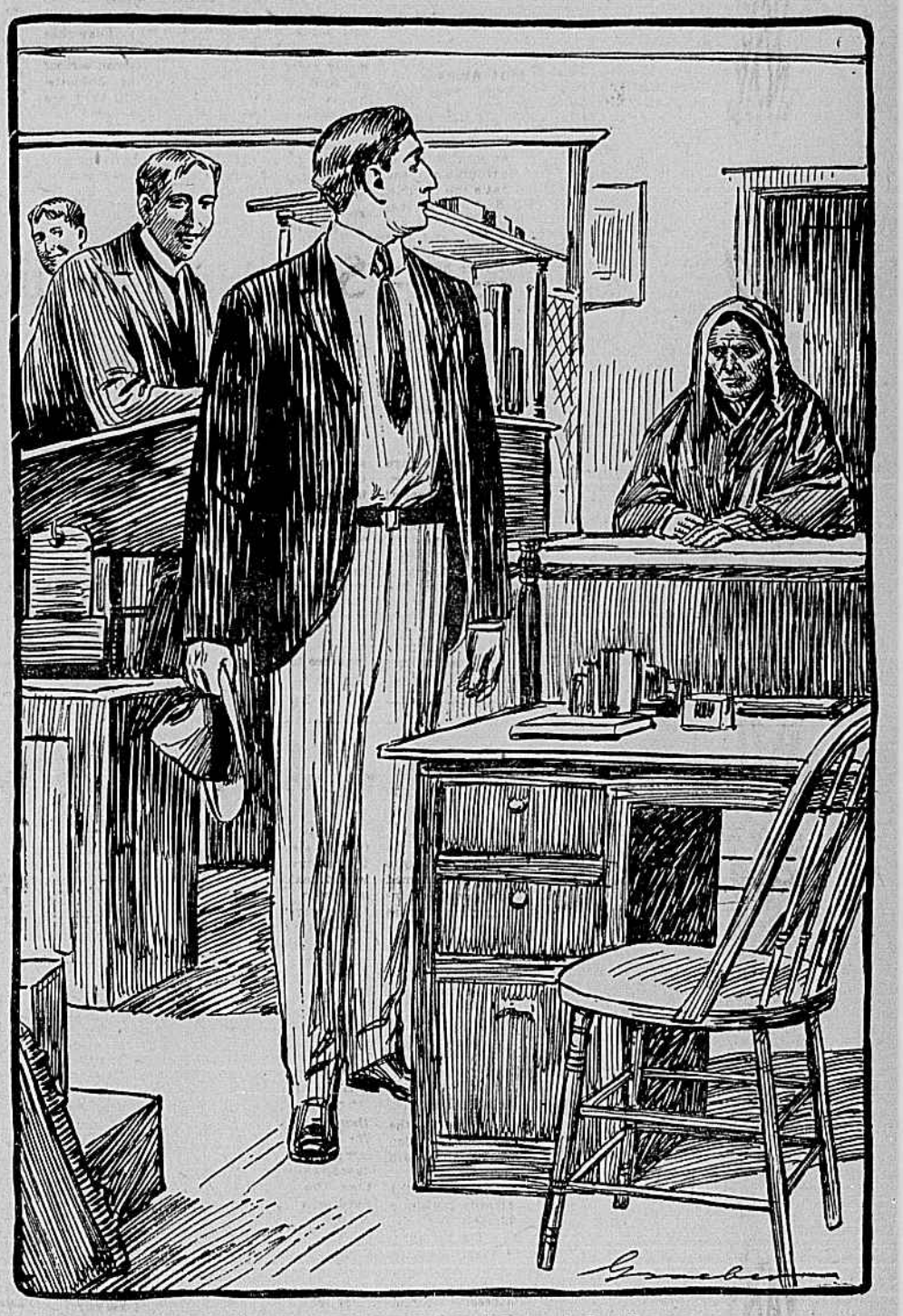
Repulsive, dirty, degraded, unspeakable, Weuto stood at the office door, when Allen West came bounding up the steps to his morning work.

"Hi, West, there's your mother-in-law!" sang out one of the clerks.

Allen turned sharply. Then he sat down to his desk with a grim, white face.

All day the careless words stung him, and Weuto's crafty, cruel face was before him.

He spent the evening with Mildred Deane. As the days passed, he betook himself more and more to her society. Emily's spirits drooped. When the searching winds of March came, she began to cough.



"Hi, West, There's Your Mother-in-Law"

"You must go to the doctor, Emily," said Mrs. Deane. Then, with brutal frankness, "If you should have consumption, I couldn't have you with the children. Indians are so liable to consumption," she explained.

Consumption! It is the terror of the reservation. No word strikes such horror to the heart of an Indian.

Emily waited for the doctor's verdict with much suspense. Nothing mattered much, if Allen did not love her. But when he said to Mrs. Deane:

"You'd better send the girl home," Emily, overhearing him, accepted death as her portion.

It was, in fact, decreed that Emily must go back to her mother. For fifteen years she had never been away from the cleanly environment of the agency.

May was hot and dusty. There is no spring in Dakota. Summer comes in a day. The grass is green, the crocuses peep out, and the hot, dry winds blow, blow, blow, with unceasing vehemence. The "dust devils" scurry over the prairie. Thousands of huge Russian thistles roll and toss before the wind like the waves of the sea.

It was on such a day as this that Weuto, her lean, spotted ponies in rope harness, drawing her rickety, unpainted wagon, came for Emily.

Poor Emily! She could only pray that death would come speedily.

All the long day the wind blew round them with a booming sound like artillery; the air was full of blinding dust.

It seemed to Emily that the ride would never end; but at dusk they came to a small house, one of those houses that the government sends out all ready to put together like a Chinese puzzle. Outside were a plow, a seeder and a hay rake, in various stages of rust and decay. These farming implements the government, eager to prove that the Indian can support himself, had provided for Yellow Bird's use. They had, however, never been used.

Piled up against the house were two once white iron bedsteads, provided by the same benefactor for the comfort of Weuto and her family.

The Indian prefers to sleep on the earth floor, rolled up in a blanket, with his feet to the fire.

The wolf hounds, savage, shaggy Indian dogs, came bounding over the prairie at the first sound of the ponies' feet. Their gaunt bodies glided over the ground with wonderful rapidity. The children, as they peeped from the house door, seemed only a shade less repulsive than the hounds. Yellow Bird stood in the background.

"Tipi mitawa" (my house), grunted Weuto.

Emily sat still, her every faculty benumbed by despair.

Weuto picketed the spotted ponies, and went into the house. Emily sat in the wagon, wild thoughts of flight, of suicide, in her mind.

Weuto, after preparing the Indian bread of flour, soda and water, baked in the coals, bade Emily enter.

The smoke from the open fire in the centre of the room filled the air. The dirt floor was foul. There was a rusty sewing machine (or the remains of one), an unused cook stove (Weuto preferred to cook over a hole in the ground), a few broken chairs and seven trunks of varying sizes. His trunk is an Indian's dearest possession. These trunks contained the "best clothes" of Weuto and Yellow Bird—buckskin dancing aprons, colored with bright pigments and edged with small mirrors; eagle-feather war bonnets, used in the Indian dances; gayly beaded moccasins and shields, and many and gorgeous blankets of all the hues of the rainbow.

Emily was terror-stricken by her unaccustomed surroundings. She was faint for food, she could not eat the black bread Weuto offered her, or drink the "black medicine" which is the name the Indians give to the horrible compound the squaws make from the coffee berry.

The various members of the family, together with the hideous wolfhounds, stretched themselves on the floor, and were soon asleep. Weuto and Emily alone lay awake. If Weuto felt any joy that Emily was with her, or any sorrow that her daughter was ill, she did not show it. She went out and brought the small box in which were Emily's few belongings.

By the firelight she picked them over carefully. When the fire flickered lower, she cast on a book to make it burn brighter. Then she gathered up all the clothing, and locked it in one of the seven trunks.

Overcome by exhaustion and hunger, too faint to sit erect any longer, Emily laid her delicate body down on that foul floor, among those dirty, unwashed Indians, and slept the sleep of utter weariness. She had a severe hemorrhage in the morning. Weuto, according to the Indian custom when one of their number is ill, assured her that she was going to die. The Indian men are far more pitiful than the women. It was Yellow Bird who brought in one of the iron beds and put some blankets on it, while Weuto looked on with a derisive smile.

Emily never rose from that bed. The loathsome food, the unspeakable surroundings soon did their work.

It was barely a month before Mildred and Allen, sitting on the porch in the early evening, saw Weuto's spotted ponies approaching, and heard that long-drawn, mournful wail, the death cry with which an Indian announces from afar a death in his family, and which once heard can never be forgotten.

Allen West left his sweetheart, and walked alone on the prairie until the dawn of another day silvered the bluffs of the Missouri.

Before he came back he flung far out into the river a tiny beaded purse.